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ABSTRACT

This article reflects the ongoing development of a principled and flexible methodological framework for English language teaching (ELT) that is free from traditional or dogmatic constraints, flexible enough to take into account new ideas and insights, and critical of current trends and the claims of authorities and experts. It begins by examining common attitudes toward ELT methods, noting that although theorists and researchers have abandoned the search for a single perfect teaching method, there are still language schools that use only one specific method. The paper goes on to examine attitudes toward methodology selection, focusing on several attitudes that are not likely to result in principled teaching (e.g., just using the coursebook and other published materials, using the most popular methodology, using the most modern methodology, using the methodology advocated by experts, applying proven theories and conclusive research findings, and using an eclectic methodology). The paper asserts that principled teaching requires the following: (1) awareness of different views on the nature and use of the target language as well as language learning, (2) awareness of one's own beliefs and theories, and (3) the ability to observe critically, recognize patterns, and draw conclusions. (Contains 46 references.) (SM)

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SHOPPING AT THE ELT SUPERMARKET
Principled Decisions & Practices*

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There is nothing as practical as a good theory.
(Kurt Lewin)

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INTRODUCTION

This article reflects my ongoing development of a principled and flexible methodological framework beyond pre-packaged, one-size-fits-all methods; a framework free from traditional or dogmatic constraints, flexible enough to take into account new ideas and insights, but also critical of current popular trends and the claims of authorities and experts.

In this article I examine some common attitudes towards methodology selection, discuss the notion of eclecticism and outline the nature and implications of principled decision-making and practice in ELT. I argue that principled teaching requires *a)* awareness of different views on the nature and use of the target language, as well as language learning (see Brown, 1994; Richards & Rogers, 1986; Rivers, 1972), *b)* awareness of one's own beliefs and theories, and *c)* the ability to observe critically, recognise patterns and draw conclusions.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS ELT METHODS

For more than a century the ELT profession was preoccupied with the quest for the elusive 'best' teaching method (see McArthur, 1983: 96-103; Sweet, 1899/1964: 2-3), in the sense of "a 'package deal' of attitudes, theories, methods, techniques" (Strevens, 1977: 23). As a result, one method would reign supreme for a longer or shorter period of time, only to be succeeded eventually by a new 'perfect' method. Recent examples include the rise and fall of the Audiolingual method, and the criticism that followed the widespread acceptance and adoption of Communicative Language Teaching (e.g. Johnson, 1992).

Each changeover brought in its wake changes (subtle or radical) in syllabus design and teaching materials and procedures. For example, explicit grammar teaching has come into, and gone out of, fashion according to the predominant doctrine of the time: 'in' with Grammar-Translation, 'out' with the Audiolingual method, 'in limbo' with Communicative Language Teaching (according to the individual teacher's interpretation) and 'in' again more recently in the form of 'noticing' and 'consciousness-raising' (see Schmidt, 1990; Sharwood Smith, 1986).

Studies on the comparative effectiveness of different methods were unable to provide helpful answers. No clear picture emerged from the body of research, as the conclusions of different projects were contradictory (see Prator, 1976). What is more, the conclusions themselves were questioned because "the number of interrelated variables makes it extremely difficult to attribute the results to the method variables in question" (Woods, 1996: 5).

For over thirty years, the consensus in ELT has been shifting towards the realisation that a perfect method, that is one that works independently of the teaching/learning context, is unattainable (see Brown, 1994: 14-15, 291; McArthur, 1983: 96-97). Actually, Brown (1994: 292) goes so far as to describe the stage of "looking for final, clear-cut answers" as "professional childhood".

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As a solution to the methodological conundrum, an "eclectic" attitude to teaching was proposed by a number of methodologists (see Girard, 1986; Haskel, 1978; Prator, 1976). Eclecticism was seen as an alternative to the adoption of existing pre-packaged, ready-to-use methods. Unfortunately, the concept of eclecticism was not rigorously defined. As a result, it was often misinterpreted as 'anything goes' and led to haphazard combinations of procedures and materials (van Els et. al., 1984: 156).

Although theorists and researchers have abandoned the search for a single perfect method (see van Els et al, 1984: 156), there are still language schools which use (or at least purport to use) only one particular method. The ELT community, then, still faces the pressing question of appropriate methodology.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS METHODOLOGY SELECTION

As points of departure for my discussion I will use different attitudes towards methodology selection that are not likely to result in principled teaching. I have become aware of these attitudes through my interaction with teachers and teacher trainers/educators. I do not present them as either/or attitudes, but as elements of a complex, composite one. Nor am I making any claims about their relative popularity; in my experience, they may appear in different combinations and varying degrees, or may not appear at all.

1. What do you mean by 'methodology'? I just use the coursebook and other published materials.

There are three main problems with this attitude. First of all, coursebooks are not always clear regarding the methodology they use in terms of 'what' and 'how' to teach. There are also cases of inconsistency between stated and actual methodology[1]. Finally, coursebooks cannot be relevant to all teaching/learning contexts (see Cunningham, 1995: 5-6; Dendrinos, 1992: 39-47). Similarly, supplementary materials (i.e. collections of tasks/activities for the teaching of specific areas, such as vocabulary or listening) usually give little or no information about their underlying methodology, or the place of the activities in a lesson. Consequently, teachers need to adapt published materials according to the needs of particular classes.

But appropriate adaptation requires teachers to recognise and be informed about the methodology used by the authors, or be able to identify the lack of clear methodology. What is more, teachers need to be conscious of their own methodological orientation, that is, their theories and beliefs about the nature of language and teaching/learning (Woods, 1996: 190-212). Such awareness is important because teachers' actual practice may contradict their perceived methodological orientation (see Karavas-Doukas, 1996; Scrivener, 1996: 80). Therefore, the effectiveness of coursebook use is contingent on the level of the teachers' awareness and knowledge.

2. I use what has worked and discard what has failed.

There are too many parameters involved in language teaching/learning for success or failure to be attributed only to the procedures and materials used. For example, the reason for success or failure may lie in the way teachers interpret the procedures suggested by particular 'methods', and the way they employ materials, rather than the actual procedures and materials themselves. Johnson (1992) in her critique of ill-perceived 'communicative' teaching procedures states:

> "Every method has its Frankenstein's monsters, grotesque parodies of whatever it is the teaching has emphasized. ... Communicative interaction does hold great potential as an aid to learning, but standard methodological procedures adopt a rather naïve, hope-for-the-best view of the communicating/ learning relationship and may need re-thinking."

A method or technique may not 'work' because the materials and/or procedures are unfamiliar to the learners and have been introduced abruptly. Learners may also react negatively to methodologies if they are not convinced about their effectiveness. In such cases it can hardly be expected that their use

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will yield positive results. Still, even when learners are willing to try out the new methodology, there may well be an initial period when their performance will deteriorate. A study on children's problem-solving (Karmiloff-Smith, 1984, reported in Shorrocks, 1991: 269) showed an initial decline in performance before final improvement. The decline was attributed to the children's experimenting with new strategies before finally mastering them.

3. I use the most popular methodology.

Popularity is not necessarily an indication of quality. As was mentioned in the introduction, methods that enjoyed immense popularity in the past were eventually abandoned for other, 'better' methods, which were in turn succeeded by others. What is more, the majority who elevate a method to its cult status may not share the same context with other teachers. More importantly, the popularity of a particular methodology may not be the result of its adoption by the majority of teachers worldwide (which would at least indicate that a large number of teachers in a variety of contexts find it effective), but of its promotion by a small number of influential educational and/or political centres (see Canagarajah, 1999: 103-105; Phillipson, 1992: 171-218). Finally, the popularity of some methods may well be due to successful advertising. Van Els et al (1984: 156) note that in foreign language teaching "novelties are propagated which sometimes show a remarkable similarity to sales stunts in commerce", something that reflects rather badly on the level of professionalism in ELT.

4. I use the methodology I was trained in.

The key word here is 'trained'. Training (as distinct from education) aims at "the development of a *partial competence*, which endows one with a limited number of ready-to-use techniques without ensuring that an understanding of the underlying principles has been achieved nor that *choice* can be made with reference to a set of criteria" (Vassilakis, 1998: 7). Furthermore, by their very nature, training courses tend to be quite short (usually ranging between 50 and 200 hours), which makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for teaching issues to be dealt with in any breadth or depth.

Training in specific methods or procedures (e.g. Presentation-Practice-Production) may help teachers to address particular teaching/learning situations or issues with some degree of effectiveness, but does not equip them with the flexibility required to address the multitude of interrelated issues in ELT. Courses purporting to train teachers in an eclectic methodology may well offer a "cluttered kaleidoscope of one-off sessions" (Edwards, 1996: 100-101). What is worse, teachers may have been led to misunderstand the very nature and relation of the method(s) and procedures covered in some training courses. For example, Scrivener (1996: 80) mentions that "a curious by-product of many current training courses is that trainees schooled in PPP come out believing themselves to be trained in 'communicative language teaching'."

5. I use the most modern methodology.

This attitude is problematic, as it implies that the selection was made uncritically, solely for reasons of novelty. The practices of teachers who adopt the latest word in language teaching methodology are not expected to be consistent with (and may well contradict) what the methodology actually stands for.

What is more, 'modern' does not necessarily mean 'better'. It is true that the word 'modern' carries connotations of 'improved' and 'developed'; it is as a result of such connotations that methods presented as modern have an intuitive popular appeal. What I would like to stress here is the other side of the coin: **'modern' can also be interpreted as 'not thoroughly tested yet'**.

Finally, what is presented as modern may well be reheated old ideas. This point is illustrated by the following quiz (Gabrielatos, 1996, 1998):

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Read the excerpts below and decide when they were written

Extract 1. Methods

"... but none of these methods retain their popularity long - the interest in them soon dies out. There is a constant succession of them ... They have all failed to keep a permanent hold of the public mind because they have all failed to perform what they promised: after promising impossibilities they have all turned out to be on the whole no better than the older methods. The methods I have just mentioned are failures because they are based on an insufficient knowledge of the science of language, and because they are one-sided. ... A good method must, before all, be comprehensive and eclectic. It must be based on a thorough knowledge of the science of language ... In utilizing this knowledge it must be constantly guided by the psychological laws on which memory and the association of ideas depend."

Extract 2. Grammar

"When it comes to foreign language teaching, the generally accepted view is that the same mistaken approach based on the written language, the same kind of school grammars, will be able to work miracles and teach a new language. They never have, and they never will. And even if you actually succeeded in stuffing the pupils' heads with the best grammars ... they still would not know the language! ... Language, moreover, is formed and moulded by the unconscious action of the community as a whole, and like the life of the community is in a constant state of change and development. Consequently, we cannot compress the grammar of a language into a series of rigid rules, which, once laid down by the grammarians, are as unalterable as the laws of the Medes and Persians. On the contrary, grammar is what the community makes it; what was in vogue yesterday is forgotten today, what is right today will be wrong tomorrow. ... Even if we further know all the rules of the grammarians, we shall find ourselves unable in actual practice to get very far in stringing our words together or in understanding what is said to us in return."

Extract 3. The role of learners

"Every individual [has an] ability to instruct himself. The function of a teacher [is] to respond to the learner, not to direct and control him by explaining things in advance. ... Students should look for similarities and differences, generalize their observations, form and test hypotheses, and discover how the language work[s]."

[See Appendix 1 for the answers]

Table 1. ELT methodology quiz.

The excerpts above touch on some of the central attitudes in contemporary ELT, such as learner-centredness, focus on actual language use, the importance of communication, data-driven learning, noticing, awareness-raising, and the influence of social context. I find it extremely interesting (and educational) that so many of the 'modern' attitudes in language teaching were actually proposed up to a century and a half ago (if not even earlier than that). What I find disturbing is that it took so long for these attitudes to start finding their way into mainstream ELT thinking and practice.

6. I use the methodology advocated by the experts.

First of all, there is no unanimous expert opinion. ELT professionals who have reached expert status disagree, either because they come from different theoretical and/or methodological schools, or because they simply need a niche to maintain their expert status. Which of the different expert

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recommendations are teachers of that attitude to follow? Different views aside, there are more reasons why it would be wise for teachers to be sceptical and critical of the wisdom of experts.[2]

They may not be practising teachers. In order for expert advice to be helpful to the ELT practitioner it has to be not only based on a theoretical and research foundation, but also rooted in current and ongoing classroom experience and reflection. Unfortunately, since being an expert is a full-time job, experts tend to be divorced from the classroom, or at best have minimal contact with language learners.

They may not have experience of specific contexts. Even in cases of ELT professionals who are practising teachers and have reached a high level of knowledge and skill, their ideas may not be helpful *as they stand*. Their ideas come from their particular experience in specific contexts, which may have little in common with the contexts in which other teachers operate.

They have their own filters. Experts cannot be expected to be entirely objective; their interpretation of theory, research and experience is bound to be influenced by their own beliefs and views.

They may not be entirely sincere. ELT has developed into an industry, the popularity of any one methodology being translated into increased sales of materials. Experts can be instrumental in their successful promotion.

They may not be truly experts. It is not impossible for ELT professionals to have made a name for themselves for reasons not directly proportionate to their actual knowledge and skills.

It is important then that teachers do not accept or reject expert opinions wholesale, but are in a position to review and interpret expert suggestions critically and adapt them to their own contexts.

7. I apply proven theories and conclusive research findings.

There are three problematic concepts here:

The utility of theory and research does not lie in their application to practice. The function of theory and research in ELT is not to provide recipes and dictate practical applications, but to construct informed and coherent frameworks for principled interpretation of experience and discovery of implications. Theories are helpful because they provide a framework for gaining insights "into the 'why' of experience" (McLaughlin, 1987: 14). What is more, no theory can claim to have all the answers and offer the only valid set of explanations. This is probably why all methods which purported to apply a specific theory of language and/or learning to ELT ultimately failed the test of practice.

Theories cannot be proven. McLaughlin (1987: 16) states that "the successful theory is tested and escapes being disconfirmed. ... Theories can be confirmed only to a certain degree. That a theory is validated does not mean that it is true, but only that it is more probable, at present, than other explanations."

Research evidence cannot be conclusive. Teachers should keep in mind that "the classic position of the researcher is not that of one that knows the right answers but of one who is struggling to find out what the right questions might be!" (Phillips & Pugh, 2000: 48-49), and that "the nature of research is such that the more answers are obtained, the more questions arise" (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989: 254). Therefore, "researchers who claim that their theories have been definitely substantiated by research are misleading practitioners" (McLaughlin, 1987: 16).

A case in point is a recent study (Marinova-Todd et al, 2000: 9-34), which re-examined and re-interpreted the data from past research studies that had concluded that children learn more quickly and easily than adults. The study discovered that past studies had misinterpreted the data, and had under-emphasised cases of successful adult learning. The recent study attributes the differences in the speed of learning and the final proficiency levels attained not to neurobiological factors, but to motivation and expectations. The study concludes that "children learn new languages slowly and effortfully - in fact with less speed and more effort than adolescents and adults."

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I have used this example not to propose that we change our attitude towards teaching children and adults, but to illustrate that what is the accepted doctrine today may be laughed at as outdated tomorrow. My point is that research conclusions should be treated with care, and compared and contrasted with other sources, as well as one's experience, because "statistics are tools for thought, not substitutes for thought" (McLaughlin, 1987: 5). Uncritical acceptance of research conclusions may result in teachers imposing self-fulfilling prophesies on learners, or creating unrealistic expectations. For example, teachers who are convinced that adult learners cannot hope to attain a high level of competence may not challenge their adult learners enough and rob them of opportunities to realise their full potential.

It seems then that teachers are faced with three options as regards theory and research: to ignore them altogether, to rely on experts to translate theory and research for them, and to acquire the knowledge and skills which will enable them to discover the implications of frameworks and findings themselves. The first and second options result in teachers falling into the pitfalls described above and becoming reduced to mere 'materials operators'. The third option results in principled teaching.

8. I use an eclectic methodology

There are two interrelated problems with this attitude to ELT methodology: the concept of eclecticism has been poorly defined and is self-defying. In this section I examine problematic elements in two definitions of an 'eclectic' attitude to methodology (indicated in bold), and argue that as it is defined eclecticism is not a viable solution to the methodological question in ELT.

Eclecticism: Definitions & Appeal

According to Girard (1986: 11-12), the eclectic teacher aims to achieve

> "the maximum benefit from all the **methods** and **techniques** at his or her **disposal**, according to the special needs and resources of his/her pupils at any given time. ... [An eclectic attitude towards methodology provides the] flexibility and adaptability that will allow the teacher to select among a variety of **approaches**, methods and techniques those elements best fitted to the needs of a given class at a given time. Such a decision will not be taken on the spur of the moment in a haphazard way, but as the conclusion of a serious **analysis** of the situation and of the available techniques and devices. ... The eclectic teacher will make his personal choices on the basis of the **questions** he will have to ask himself, as he goes along, about the main issues of language teaching, and on the basis of the answers he will be able to give in connection with inescapable **criteria**".

A similar attitude, termed a "complete method", was proposed by Palmer (1922, in Girard, 1986).

> "The 'complete method' is not a compromise between two antagonistic schools; it boldly incorporates what is valuable in any system or method of teaching and **refuses to recognize any conflict**, except the conflict between the inherently good and the inherently bad. The complete method will embody every type of teaching except bad teaching, and every process of learning except **defective learning**."

It is true that the attitudes described above have intuitive appeal. It does seem reasonable to combine the most suitable elements of different available methods, instead of applying a specific one. The intuitive reasons for implementing an eclectic methodology are summarised in Table 2 (Gabrielatos, 1996).

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Safety	The use of a variety of ideas and procedures from different existing approaches and methods will increase the chances of learning taking place.
Interest	Teachers need to use different techniques to hold the learners' attention.
Diversity	Different learning/teaching contexts require different methodologies.
Flexibility	Awareness of a range of available techniques will help teachers exploit materials better and manage unexpected situations.
Inevitability	Informed teaching is bound to be eclectic.

Table 2. Intuitive reasons for an eclectic approach.

Eclecticism: Limitations & Pitfalls

Despite the intuitive appeal of eclecticism, a closer examination of its definitions reveals that the selection and combination of elements from different methodologies is much more complex than it initially seems, and that its implementation involves a number of pitfalls. In this part I examine and clarify the terms indicated in bold in the definitions above, and discuss the limitations and pitfalls of an eclectic methodology.

First, we need to define the terms 'approach', 'method' and 'technique', and clarify their relation. According to Richards & Rogers (1986: 16), "a method is theoretically related to an approach, is organisationally determined by a design, and is practically realized in procedure". The following table (adapted from Richards & Rogers, 1986: 28) outlines the three elements which comprise a method.

M E T H O D		
Approach	**Design**	**Procedure**
Theory of Language Theory of Language Learning	Objectives Syllabus type Activity types Learner roles Teacher roles Role of materials	Techniques Practices Behaviours

Table 3. Components of a language teaching method

According to this definition, eclecticism cannot be a method, since it is neither informed by specific theories, nor consistent in its design and procedures. It has also been argued that the use of the term 'an eclectic method' defeats the very purpose for the proposal of an eclectic methodology, as it suggests "the need for a single, best, method to follow" (Haskel, 1978).

A further problem with an eclectic attitude is that it "refuses to recognize any conflict" between different methodologies (Palmer, 1922, in Girard, 1986). The problem is that inherent conflicts do exist between different approaches, and they may well render incompatible the teaching procedures informed by contradictory approaches. I believe that teachers who adopt an eclectic attitude need to be knowledgeable enough to recognise methodological conflicts at any level (approach, design, procedure) and be skilled enough to manage such conflicts. A case in point is the problematic notion of "defective learning" (Palmer, 1922, in Girard, 1986). What is regarded as a satisfactory learning outcome is closely linked to the approach and/or method one has adopted (see also Woods, 1991: 5). For example, is fluency/communication or accuracy the target of instruction? What is the attitude towards errors? What is considered acceptable pronunciation?

An examination of different methods and attitudes in ELT shows that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between approaches on one hand, and design and/or procedure on the other (see Richards & Rodgers, 1986). In the following matching task (Table 4), mock theories, procedures and materials are used to demonstrate the complex relation between approach and procedure (Gabrielatos, 1996).

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Match the mock theories of language and language learning to the language teaching procedures.

'Theories' of Language

a. *Languages are like algebra: logical systems with a clear and fixed structure. Nevertheless the structure of each one is unique.*
b. *All languages share the same basic structure. Their differences lie in vocabulary and pronunciation.*
c. *Languages are different in most respects. Nevertheless they share one central characteristic: communication of meaning always requires appropriate combination of verbal and non-verbal elements.*

'Theories' of Language Learning

d. *Learning comes about through negative experiences.*
e. *Learning takes place through individual mental reflection.*
f. *Learning is achieved when both body and mind are involved.*

Teaching Procedures & Materials

1. *As the teacher is explaining a rule he/she slaps learners on the face. The teacher takes care that all learners are equally slapped.*
2. *As learners are writing the answers to an exercise they occasionally move about on their chairs, stand up and hop for a while, do physical exercises etc. The teacher goes around and urges the less energetic ones to join the others.*
3. *There is complete silence in the classroom. Learners are involved in writing an exercise, occasionally looking at the rules on the blackboard.*
4. *All learners have bilingual dictionaries which they use to understand reading/listening texts and translate what they write/say.*
5. *Instruction consists mainly of memorisation of rules and their accurate application in exercises.*
6. *The teacher not only corrects the learners' speech, but also their posture, facial expression and gestures.*

Table 4. Relation between approaches and procedures

It is clear that similar procedures may result from different approaches, or similar approaches may be realised in different sets of procedures.

In terms of available techniques and resources, the specific teaching/learning context imposes limitations on what is at a teacher's disposal. Therefore, teachers may not always be in a position to be truly eclectic and will need to utilise available resources to the maximum (Gabrielatos, 1999, 2000). There are also questions regarding the "analysis of the situation", which the eclectic teacher is expected to perform in order to make methodological decisions. What are the principles on which such an analysis will be based? How do teachers identify needs? What sort of questions are formulated? How do teachers act upon such questions? How do teachers form criteria? How valid are they? Are such criteria unalterable?

In order for teachers to be able to ask helpful questions, identify learner needs accurately and make informed decisions they need to be aware not only of different teaching procedures and materials, but more importantly of the approaches (i.e. theories) which inform and shape such practices (see Rivers, 1972: 5). They need to have an informed, conscious, clear and flexible methodological framework, otherwise "there is the danger in eclecticism of creating a Frankenstein monster" (Haskel, 1978).

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To conclude, the idea of having flexibility, of being free to select between alternatives, rather than being constrained by the materials and procedures prescribed by a specific pre-packaged method, and consequently by its limitations, is indeed an appealing one. Unfortunately, in their effort to break away from the domination of methods, the proponents of an eclectic attitude failed to make it clear that there are a number of prerequisites for such a selection to be effective. Because of its loose and incomplete definition, eclecticism is fraught with problems.[3]

ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEVELOPMENT: TWO POLAR OPPOSITES

If pre-packaged methods have flaws and limitations[4], eclecticism has come to mean 'anything goes', expert opinions are to be taken with a pinch of salt, theory doesn't point clearly towards application, and research is about questions more than answers, where does that leave the language teacher?

A strong indication as to which direction the solution lies comes from current research in language teacher education. The consensus has been shifting towards the opinion that it is the teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes, rather than any methodological package or framework, which have the greatest influence on observable teaching behaviours (see Karavas-Doukas, 1996; Roberts, 1998; Ulichny, 1996; Woods, 1996: 226-239). In other words, it is the teachers' *contextualised interpretation* of any given methodological framework that is actually put to use in the classroom. Therefore, development "involves changes in knowledge and beliefs and not simply changes in skill" (Elliot & Calderhead, 1995).

Edge (1997: 27) defines *development* as "a continuing process of self-directed movement" and contends that "one aspect of becoming a teacher is the growth of a commitment to continuing self-development". It seems then that it is important that teachers are willing/motivated to develop. Motivation can be influenced by intrinsic or extrinsic factors. Intrinsic factors may include attitudes towards learning and change, learning skills, and ability to observe, analyse and synthesise. Extrinsic factors may include the teachers' educational context, the criteria for becoming a language teacher in their countries, and the social status and income bracket of language teachers in their community (see Elliot & Calderhead, 1995).

Below, I describe two attitudes towards language teaching and professional development, which I see as polar opposites. In terms of potential for development these two profiles are to a large extent congruent with the lower and higher points (respectively) of the five stages of professional development described by Berliner (1994) [See Appendix 2 for a summary]. What I mean is that it is unlikely for intuitive teachers to move away from "novice" level, whereas for principled teachers "expert" level is attainable. Although I have met some language teachers whose attitude could be identified as 'intuitive' or 'principled', in my experience the majority occupy a middle ground.

Intuitive teachers

In an essay on the importance of philosophy for the layperson, Ayn Rand (1974/1984: 6) expresses ideas which are extremely close to my views on the importance of a conscious methodological framework. One excerpt is particularly relevant to the ELT context if 'philosophy' is replaced by 'awareness of theories of language and learning/teaching'. The following adaptation of this excerpt summarises my view of intuitive or 'practical' language teaching.

Teachers who operate *only* by intuition are like people who are run by a computer, unaware of, or unclear about, the principles behind its programming and unable to make effective use of the information on the monitor or printouts, because they either don't have such access, or lack the knowledge and skills required to accurately decode and interpret the computer's output. At best, they can only hope that the computer software is programmed to address their specific teaching/learning context.

Teachers who dismiss theoretical frameworks and research insights as too academic and impractical invariably fall into the trap of believing that they use a 'theory-free', 'common-sense' and 'practical' methodology. They are unaware of the fact that they are actually implementing a motley selection of

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principles, which they have subconsciously absorbed from their social, cultural and educational contexts (e.g. received wisdom, previous learning experiences, coursebooks). Consequently, they are in chronic awe (or even terror) of the different theories, methods, materials and procedures available.

As they are uncertain or unaware of the principles behind their own methodology and of alternative methodological frameworks, it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to develop through critical evaluation of their actions and the learners' output and reactions. As a result, they are entangled in either of the following two **vicious circles**. In the first, they avoid experimentation and treat anything outside their immediate grasp and traditional practices as sour grapes. In the second, they adopt popular novel methodologies uncritically and superficially, only to abandon them at the first sign of 'failure' in order to either embrace the next methodological trend, or revert to traditional practices.

Principled teachers

Principled teaching is the result of conscious and informed decisions, and is concerned with the *implications* of theories and research findings, *not their application*. The wider and deeper the teachers' knowledge of different theories and approaches, and the history of language teaching, the better use they can make of available elements. Awareness of principles enables principled teachers to match procedures and materials to learning context, and combine relevant, compatible elements (Gabrielatos, 1999, 2000).

Principled teachers do not blame theory (i.e. the construction of frameworks) if existing theories of language or learning appear to be unhelpful for ELT. Their attitude is that well constructed theories are indeed helpful, *but not* because they can provide them with direct answers to the questions of 'what' and 'how' to teach. They are helpful because, firstly, they "have generality: they extend to situations and events not specifically included in the phenomena that the theory was first set up to explain" and secondly, because they "guide prediction ... they are the ground from which hypotheses spring" (McLaughlin, 1987: 14, 7). When faced with a seemingly unhelpful framework, their reaction is not to dismiss it out of hand, but to re-examine their interpretation and views on its potential implications. If the framework still seems inadequate, they attempt to develop it further, or formulate a more appropriate one (see Freeman, 2000; Roberts, 1998: 29-42).

In other words, principled teachers use their knowledge of existing frameworks to interpret their teaching experience and formulate hypotheses, which they test against their practice/experience, as well as new views on, and insights into, language and teaching/learning. They have recognised that there is no end-point in development, and that any answers and solutions are only temporary. They don't regard new views, theories, methodologies, materials and procedures as something they have to adopt or reject, but as food for thought, as more raw material for their flexible frameworks. In this way they are involved in a **virtuous cycle** of development. I am not arguing, of course, that their decisions are always correct, only that they are conscious, informed, and have internal consistency.

A note on intuition

Brown (2000: 292-293) provides a more positive view on intuition, but he still cautions that it is "the product, in part, of a firm grounding in what is known, in analytical terms, about how people learn languages and why some people do not learn languages. ... Intuitions are formed at the crossroads of knowledge and experience." Similarly, Berliner (1994) presents intuition as one of the attributes of "proficient" and "expert" teachers (the highest two of his five stages of development). According to Berliner, such teachers have the ability to recognise similarities holistically, which allows them "to predict events more precisely".

As I see it, the discrepancy between my negative use of 'intuition' and Berliner's and Brown's positive one is due to terminology rather than concepts.[5] Brown (2000: 292) states that "one of the important characteristics of intuition is its nonverbalizability", that is the inability to explain verbally the rationale behind decisions. Berliner's (1994) "expert" teachers can "bring analytic processes to bear on the situation" when "anomalies occur". Since analytic processes need ability to verbalise, which in turn requires explicit knowledge of concepts and terms, the intuitive teacher is not in a position to analyse with any degree of accuracy - and therefore unable to make informed (i.e. principled) decisions. The

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quality that Berliner and Brown seem to describe has to do with speed and automatisation, and is more akin to "procedural knowledge" in Anderson's ACT* model (1983).[6]

CONCLUSION

Methodological packages and approaches are only tools. However well constructed, their effectiveness depends much more on the teachers' interpretation than the design of the packages themselves. Pre-prepared guidelines do not equip someone to deal successfully with the complex interaction of numerous, ever shifting factors that is language teaching/learning. Actually, it seems highly probable that if the use of fixed sets of materials and procedures becomes widespread, the need for principled teachers will diminish. Consequently, courses/programmes for language teachers will tend to become ever-more cursory and superficial. This process will eventually reduce the role and status of language teachers to that of 'materials operators' - with all the attendant negative effects on both the emerging teaching profession and the learners.

Principled teaching is not concerned with the consumption (i.e. application) of theories and pre-packaged methodologies. It involves critical evaluation of the implications of theories, their development, as well as the construction of new theories. Principled teachers do not depend on packaged products, although they are perfectly able to use them flexibly to suit their teaching context. Principled language teachers are aware of different views on the nature and use of language, as well as the rationale behind teaching methodology, they do not only translate theory into practice, they also contribute to the development of the ELT profession.

NOTES

1. I have come to this conclusion through my experience in using coursebooks as well as conducting materials evaluation workshops. For an example, see a detailed comparison of the stated aims regarding the treatment of pronunciation and the actual materials and procedures employed in the New Cambridge English Course, which showed considerable inconsistency (Gabrielatos, 1994/2002).
2. Through my reading of ELT periodicals I have become increasingly aware of the following pattern: the more a publication is directed at teachers (rather than teacher educators, theorists or researchers in ELT), the fewer the references either to frameworks or to other people's ideas, and the higher the reliance on the authors' experience and expertise.
3. Brown (2000: 14, 2001: 40-41) uses the terms 'eclectic' and 'principled' interchangeably. I believe that it is more sensible to distinguish between the two terms for the reasons I have discussed.
4. Most pre-packaged methods lack a comprehensive and clearly defined approach, that is an informing theory of language and/or learning (see Brown, 2001: 18-35; Richards & Rodgers, 1986).
5. *Collins English Dictionary* (1998) gives the following definition of 'intuition': 1. Knowledge or belief obtained neither by reason nor by perception. 2. Instinctive knowledge or belief. 3. A hunch or unjustified belief. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1995) defines 'intuition' as follows: 1. The ability to understand or know something by using your feelings rather than by carefully considering the facts. 2. An idea about what is true in a particular situation based on strong feelings rather than facts.
6. ACT* is a model of language generation (Anderson, 1983). It distinguishes between "declarative" knowledge ('what') and "procedural" knowledge ('how'). Declarative knowledge is available to consciousness and can be used as a set of instructions to guide behaviour through "interpretative", "problem-solving", or "analogy-forming" procedures. Procedural knowledge is not conscious and only comes about by repeated use of declarative knowledge in "productions". According to ACT*, knowledge starts as declarative and gradually becomes procedural through "strengthening" and "tuning" processes while using combined units of declarative knowledge in "productions".

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APPENDIX 1

Key to methodology quiz

Extract 1

From Sweet (**1899**, reprinted 1964).

Extract 2

From Wilhelm Vietor (**1886**) 'Der Sprachunterricht muss umkehren' ('Language teaching must start afresh'). Translated by A.P.R. Howatt and David Abercrombie, with Beat Buchmann. Translation printed in Howatt, 1984: 340-363, excerpt from p. 347.

Extract 3

Excerpts from the discussion of the method developed by J. J. Jacotot between **1815-1830,** reprinted in Howatt, 1984: 150-152).

APPENDIX 2

Summary of Berliner's fives stages of professional development

(Source: Berliner, 1994)

Novice

The behaviour of the novice ... is ... relatively inflexible and tends to conform to whatever rules and procedures the person was told to follow. Only minimal skill should really be expected.

- Real world experience appears to be far more important than verbal information.
- The elements of the task must be labelled and learned.
- A set of context-free rules must be acquired.
- The basic terminology of teaching needs to be learned.

Advanced Beginner

- Experience can meld with verbal knowledge.
- Similarities across contexts are recognised.
- Episodic knowledge is built up.
- Strategic knowledge is developed.
- Context begins to guide behaviour.

The novice and the advanced beginner ... may also lack a certain responsibility for their actions ... [because] they are labelling and describing events, following rules, and recognising and clarifying contexts, but not actively determining through personal action what is happening.

Competent

Competent teachers ...

- are more personally in control of events ... [and therefore] feel more responsibility ... they often feel emotional about success and failure in a way that is different and more intense than that of novices or advanced beginners.
- make conscious choices, set priorities and decide on plans
- learn not to make timing or targeting errors
- learn to make curriculum and targeting decisions'

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Proficient

- Intuition and know-how become prominent.
- Out of the wealth of experience ... comes a holistic recognition of similarities ... [which] allows the proficient individual to predict events more precisely
- The proficient performer, however ... is still analytic and deliberative in deciding what to do.

Expert

Expert teachers ...

- have both an intuitive grasp of the situation and a nonanalytic and nondeliberative sense of the appropriate response to be made.
- show fluid and effortless performance.
- this performance may be due, in part, to their use of routines.
- are not consciously choosing what to attend to and what to do.
- are more likely ... to discern what is important from what is not when interpreting classroom phenomena.
- When anomalies occur ... they bring analytic processes to bear on the situation. But when things are going smoothly, experts rarely appear to be reflective about their performance.
- show more emotionality about the successes and failures of their work .

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